DEVELOP YOUR CAREER WITH A PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATION

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REFERENCES & RESOURCES .................................................................11

JOB AIDS

CAREER DEVELOPMENT WORKSHEET .................................................13
CERTIFICATION FINAL SELECTION WORKSHEET ..........................14
CERTIFICATION MAINTENANCE WORKSHEET .............................15

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The right certification can change your life. Professional certifications help people gain and validate skills and competencies that make them better at what they do, which makes their work more enjoyable and rewarding, shows itself in engagement, is often rewarded financially, improves their families, and gives them more opportunity. Certifications also help employees be more productive workers, benefiting the companies they work for and improving the overall economy, which enhances the lives of people all around the world.

Certifications are more than a form of education. I’ve seen these connections play out during the past quarter-century and have earned five certifications, each one targeted to an important facet of my career when I earned them. For more than a decade, I’ve been responsible for the certification prep materials for three professional certifications and an instructor development program with hundreds of teaching professionals.

In this issue of TD at Work, I will help you understand what professional certifications are, how they are different from other types of credentialing and education programs, and how you can find the right one for you. Some examples will come from the Association for Talent Development’s certifications and certificate programs, but I’ll look at other programs, too. Further, I’ll cover:

• how your company can benefit by having other professionals with certifications on the payroll
• how you can be instrumental in helping other employees raise their level of skills
• how to help your organization improve its productivity and achieve corporate goals fast
• why HR, quality and supply chain employees, project managers, IT, and other professionals can benefit from professional certifications.

MANAGE YOUR CAREER

As talent development professionals, we work hard to help others—our clients or those within our companies—develop themselves professionally. Yet, too often, we’re good at creating professional plans and learning opportunities for others but don’t take the time to create those plans and opportunities for ourselves.

Why do you need to engage in your own professional development? At a high level, you will want to retain and develop marketable skills—skills that employees and clients value and that, in an ideal world, are professionally and personally fulfilling.

Talent development professionals are also challenged by a rapidly changing, dynamic business environment, often due to the exponential growth of technology. The pace of change has been increasing. Doing the same job the same way is unsustainable over a 40-year career, let alone a five-year period.

Technology, process improvement and automation, and globalization have all changed the workplace dramatically, from new competitors to new markets to new products and services as well as an increase in diversity within companies, suppliers, and customers. Most significantly, companies are driving the need for us to continually upgrade our skills and knowledge as they compete in a more global, technologically intense business environment with an emphasis on frictionless service and faster delivery times. In today's environment, we need to take the advice of Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella: “Don't be a know-it-all; be a learn-it-all.”

Whose Responsibility?

Looking to others to take responsibility for your career growth is looking for help in all the wrong places. Regardless of whether your organization provides resources and opportunities, it is what you do that matters.

Charlie Tremendous Jones, an author and motivational speaker, said “You will be the same person in five years as you are today except for the people you meet and the books you read.” Add to this the courses you take and the credentials you earn. You need to take action—no one else can do that for you. If the world is changing and you stand still, you will continually drop further behind. You need to actively keep learning just to stay in the same spot.

One way to keep learning is by earning and maintaining a professional certification.

WHAT IS A PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATION?

Professional certification is a type of credentialing that provides an independent assessment of the knowledge, skills, or competencies required for competent performance of an occupational or professional role. Professional certification is intended to measure or enhance continued competence through recertification or renewal requirements.

Credentialing is a process whereby a third party with authoritative power establishes qualifications that assess a professional's ability to meet predetermined and standardized criteria. Holding a credential is evidence that demonstrates an individual's competency and capability.
Along the same lines, many talent development professionals (myself included) came to the profession via a path other than straight from college. If the undergraduate degree gets you in the door when you are looking for a job, what will get you the job and keep you there? The answer: convincing a company that you can bring it value, that you know how to do the job, or that you have great potential to learn how to do the job quickly. If you don't have much experience, the right certification tells an employer that you've mastered the body of knowledge around the competencies of the job—and if the particular certificate assesses that you know how to apply that knowledge within the job—and care enough about your career to make the time to earn the certification.

Licensure
In the United States and Canada, licensing—sometimes referred to as registration—is typically required by a state or provincial government or by law to protect the public's health, safety, and welfare by restricting a profession's practice to individuals who possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities to do so safely and competently. Practicing the profession without the required license is illegal and could result in civil or criminal charges. Licensure often requires specialized training, a relevant academic degree, and passing an exam.
Postnominal acronyms are awarded for successful exam completion, and professionals are required to maintain their licenses.

**Professional Certification**

Professional certifications are developed by nonprofit professional associations based on rigorous investigation of the competencies specific professionals need and the tasks they perform. The purpose is to validate the participant’s competency to a standardized body of knowledge. There is no legal requirement for a professional to earn the certification to practice in the profession and no regulatory oversight. Professional certifications are a nongovernmental, voluntary employment qualifications.

Certifications often require some education or experience as prerequisites to taking a certification exam, but certifications do not require the candidate to take a specific course or use certain exam preparation materials to be eligible to take the exam. Candidates are free to prepare—or not—for a certification exam in any way they choose.

Competency is tested through psychometrically validated exams; this means a psychometrician (a statistician who specializes in assessment exams) and subject matter experts review each test question to determine that they are appropriate. Postnominal acronyms are awarded for successful exam completion, and certifications do require maintenance.

Although not required for participants, most professional associations offer exam preparation materials and classes. In most certification programs, the association has different entities preparing the exams and the courseware, and neither entity reviews the other’s work. Both look to the content outline prepared for that certification. The certification exam doesn’t test the courseware, and the courseware doesn’t teach to the exam. This is one of the most fundamental and difficult concepts for most certification candidates to wrap their minds around, because it is likely different from how they have experienced educational testing up to this point.

**Endorsement**

An endorsement is a credential awarded through successful completion of a proctored exam that recognizes an additional skill obtained because of a specific training or education program. Like a professional certification, it is a nongovernment, voluntary qualification that assesses knowledge and skills acquired through training or education and testing on mastery of specific learning outcomes.

The process of creating endorsement exams is similar to that of certification exams but with a narrower focus than that of a certification exam. In some cases, endorsements are an add-on to a certification or license. For example, in education, a license may be required to teach, but an endorsement would be in the area in which you choose to teach. Endorsements do not require maintenance, and a postnominal acronym is often awarded.

**Assessment-Based Certificate Programs**

An ABC program is a nongovernment, voluntary program that assesses mastery of specific knowledge and learning outcomes after a training or education program. An ABC program does not require maintenance, and successful participants will receive a certificate but not postnominal acronyms. They may, however, receive some type of recognition. The appeal of an ABC program is that it has the potential to quantifiably validate the knowledge and skills the participants acquired during the training.

**Certificate Program**

A certificate program is a voluntary educational program that isn’t required for an individual practice in a profession but is designed for participants to acquire new knowledge, skills, or competencies tied to specific learning outcomes. The program results in a certificate that recognizes attendance and participation at the learning event or program. Exams are optional and are delivered via an unproctored method. Certificate programs do not require maintenance and award a certificate, but no postnominal acronyms or recognitions are awarded.

**Recertification**

Once you’ve earned a professional certification, how do you keep your knowledge of the profession fresh and